

Corps poised to help in Hurricanes wake

District is designated National Ice Team

By Bruce Hill, Jr. and Kelsey Seeger, USACE Public Affairs

Forty six U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel employed by the Albuquerque District, either stood fast or deployed to staging areas in parts of the U.S. to prepare for the chance that Hurricane Dean, a category five storm, could strike the Texas border in August.

The hurricane however stayed well south of the U.S., as it blew through the Yucatan Peninsula and cut through Mexico's mainland.

Though at one point there was a reported 15 percent chance Dean could strike the U.S., the Corps and other authorities wanted to be ready.

The Albuquerque District's 46 volunteers and designees of this year's primary National Ice Team are ready for the next hurricane in a season that does not officially end until November 30.

"We got the right people for the right place at the right time," said Matt Bourgeois, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District Chief of Emergency Management.

"We identified 46 people to fill all the positions and we need a minimum of 24 people to staff 24 hours a day at four different locations," he said.

Should the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issue a mission for an emergency, the Albuquerque District would be in charge of acquiring, shipping, and assisting in the distribution of ice to the disaster area.

For those individuals who are on the ICE team they are on call everyday up to a 30-45 day period depending on their place on the team before they get rotated off active duty. The four mission managers, Elaine Johnson, Craig Lykins, Doug Bailey, and Mark Yuska, will be rotated with two being active up to forty five days before being replaced by the other two mission managers.

In order for the National ICE team to be activated there must first be a natural disaster that the local government is

unable to handle and then the state government must ask for help from the federal government which must then get the President to make a Presidential Disaster Declaration so that the federal government can legally, as permitted by the Stafford Act, help in the disaster relief. FEMA, through the National Response Plan, can then give missions to the Corps to help only with flood control or coastal emergencies.

The planning and execution of this can be complicated. The Corps, for instance, is not allowed to disrupt the local economies in any state, which leaves the Corps basically only allowed to purchase surplus ice from areas outside of the disaster zone.

This means that if there is a hurricane disaster in Florida, the Corps might have to ship in ice from California and other far away states, said Bourgeois.

And the Corps can only buy ice with the permission of FEMA.

For those Corps employees who have participated in past ICE missions, which at the time were not organized by a national team but instead were complete teams that managed all the areas including debris, water, etc...have found the experiences to be rewarding.

"To be out there and to be handing ice out to people that have lost almost everything... you know you are actually contributing to making their lives better. It's unsettling but gratifying," said Craig Lykins, an Ice Team Mission Manager who has assisted in 2005 with Hurricane Wilma, and Hurricane Rita and a Supervisory Park Ranger at Cochiti.

This is to not say that being deployed in these situations is easy. A more experienced Lykins of the Albuquerque District warns that an intense commitment is necessary and that any individual that goes down range to help should expect conditions to be similar to that of a third world country.

"While in Florida I would go check on all the different areas we were giving ice to see the destruction. It is really like visiting a poor third world country," Lykins said.

Doug Bailey, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Albuquerque District Administrative Assistant in the Management Support Branch and an Ice Team Mission Manager as well as a veteran of Hurricane Dennis and Rita in 2005, also notes that any Corps employee that gets sent to the disaster must be ready to rough it.

"If you are going to take a field assignment, you need to be prepared to Bavaque, a U.S. Army term for living in the field with no hot meals", dry camping", said Bailey.

In order to get ready for the upcoming hurricane season the Corps provided some training like level one training, which provides understanding and context on the national aspect of the mission, and level two which teaches information about the implementation of the ICE program.

Those outside of the Albuquerque District have confidence that the Albuquerque District Corps will rise to the occasion should its ice services be needed.

"We're glad that Albuquerque has done everything they believe is necessary and in accordance with the doctrine...to be prepared," said Holmes Walters, a Head Officer of Homeland Security and Disaster Program Manager.

FEMA's David Passey, Public Affairs Officer for FEMA Region VI said, "We just know that we get great support from the Corps. The Army Corps of Engineers is a critical member of the Federal National Response. The Corps brings expert engineering, planning and operational capabilities to support communities in need."

